

11 Theses on Entrepreneurship Education: How shortly can we express the Essence?

Paper presented at the 3E Conference
ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference in Luneburg
April 23-24 2015

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Abstract

Questions I care about

How can I best contribute to establishing clarity and precision to the way we develop the central elements of entrepreneurship education research?

Approach

Inspired by Karl Marx's 11 theses on Feuerbach the paper establishes 11 short theses on entrepreneurship education. These theses are formulated around questions of the ontology of entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurial process, entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurship education.

Results

The 11 theses are short, precise and constitute a framework, which educators and researchers can use either for agreeing or disagreeing on what should be the foundation of entrepreneurship education research.

Implications

The paper produces a few central statements (theses) that entrepreneurship educators and entrepreneurship education researchers would benefit from either agreeing or disagreeing on.

Value/Originality

The 11 theses contribute to more precision in the nomenclature and central building blocks of entrepreneurship education research. Hereby it facilitates the development of either a common frame of reference – or an enlightened disagreement between different takes on the core elements - of entrepreneurship education

Key Words: Entrepreneurship Education, Entrepreneurial Learning,
Ontology, Didactics, Pedagogy

¹ The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study over four years (2012–2016) into PACE a project that has been made possible by funding from the Danish Strategic Research Council.

"Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways;
the point is to change it."
Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach"

Background and inspiration

In 1845 Karl Marx wrote 11 short theses² which were a coherent mixture of observations and epigrams. The theses were polemic in form and had the ambition to reconstruct a hitherto pure and distanced academic criticism into a practical, material

² Marx's original theses are:

1 The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism — that of Feuerbach included — is that the Object actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism — but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. In *The Essence of Christianity*, he therefore regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and defined only in its dirty-Jewish form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical', activity.

2 The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, *i.e.*, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking, in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.

3 The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.

4 Feuerbach starts off from the fact of religious self-estrangement of the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world, and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionised. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be annihilated theoretically and practically.

5 Feuerbach, not satisfied with *abstract thinking*, wants *sensuous contemplation* but he does not conceive sensuousness as *practical*, human-sensuous activity.

6 Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence is hence obliged: 1. To abstract from the historical process and to define the religious sentiment regarded by itself, and to presuppose an abstract — isolated - human individual. 2. The essence therefore can by him only be regarded as 'species', as an inner 'dumb' generality which unites many individuals only in a *natural* way.

7 Feuerbach consequently does not see that the 'religious sentiment' is itself a *social product*, and that the abstract individual that he analyses belongs in reality to a particular social form.

8 All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

9 The highest point reached by contemplative materialism, that is, materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals and of civil society.

10 The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity.

11 Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.

and political form of criticism and to do this within an understanding of the individuals as placed in material and social relations.

“Theses on Feuerbach” was a draft. They were an outline for a chapter of Marx and Engels’ book “The German Ideology” in which they afterwards were more fully developed.

11 theses on entrepreneurship education

The present paper seeks *sans comparison* to contribute to in a way similar to Marx’s 11 theses, by reducing the heterogeneous research area of entrepreneurship education into 11 essential observations and statements. In a similar way this paper is also a draft that is shared as a foundation on which we can develop more fully and comprehensive theories of entrepreneurship education.

The theses are ordered into four groups on ontology (1&2), process (3, 4 & 5), learning (6, 7 & 8) and education (9, 10 & 11).

The paper is deliberately short, as the 11 theses by themselves constitute the body text of the paper. For each of the theses a short argumentation is given in a footnote. The paper can be read in two ways. I suggest that initially the 11 theses are simply read from one to eleven, as they should produce logic and progression by themselves. For further reflection the footnotes, arguing for each of the theses, can be read.

Ontology

1. Entrepreneurship is how persons deal with their individual-opportunity nexus³
2. Opportunities are created by individuals - and individuals create opportunities⁴

³ Any frame-work for the development of entrepreneurship education need a definition of entrepreneurship or builds explicitly or implicitly on an entrepreneurship ontology. The supply of definitions is rich; from Schumpeter’s (1934) understanding of entrepreneurship as the innovation function of society, Kirzner’s (1997) understanding of entrepreneurship as a particular alertness towards opportunities, to Gartner’s (1988) understanding of entrepreneurship as the creation of organisations. The thesis builds to some extent on Shane and Venkataraman’s (2000) understanding of entrepreneurship as the individual-opportunity nexus. From their point of view “ entrepreneurship involves the nexus of two phenomena: the presence of lucrative opportunities and the presence of enterprising individuals”.

⁴ Although these theses rest on Shane and Venkataraman’s (2000) understanding of entrepreneurship, it takes a different stance in the controversy on whether opportunities are discovered or created (Alvarez & Barney 2007, Eckhardt & Shane 2013, Fletcher 2006, Korsgaard, 2013, Sarasvathy 2001 Sarasvathy & Venkataraman 2011) and whether some people in advance have a predisposition towards entrepreneurship (Nicolaou, Shane, Cherkas, Hunkin & Spector 2008; Blenker, Frederiksen, Korsgaard, Müller, Neergaard & Thrane 2012). Instead the idea of the nexus is taken very seriously in the sense that opportunities can only be created by individuals – and only individuals can create opportunities.

Process

3. Situations become opportunities through entrepreneurs⁵
4. Individuals become entrepreneurs when they create opportunities⁶
5. Opportunity creation and entrepreneurial becoming are processes of social construction⁷

Learning

6. Entrepreneurship is learned⁸

⁵ Instead of assuming that opportunities exist in advance “out there” (Shane and Venkataraman 2000, Korsgaard 2013) it is stated that opportunities are created in a process where entrepreneurs transform situations in their own everyday practice (Spinosa, Flores and Dreyfuss 1997, Blenker, Frederiksen, Korsgaard, Müller, Neergaard, & Thrane 2012) into opportunities. This position is in line with the “creation view” on opportunities represented by authors like Alvarez and Barney (2007), Baker and Nelson (2005) and Sarasvathy (2001).

⁶ Instead of assuming that some individual are in advance entrepreneurial or somehow predisposed to become entrepreneurs (Shane and Venkataraman 2000, Nicolaou, Shane, Cherkas, Hunkin & Spector 2008), this thesis states a broader and more mundane understanding of the process where individual become entrepreneurs. Anyone can become an entrepreneur if she engages in the process of creating opportunities (Spinosa, Flores & Dreyfuss 1997, Sarasvathy & Venkataraman 2011, Blenker, Frederiksen, Korsgaard, Müller, Neergaard, & Thrane 2012).

⁷ In the entrepreneurial process we must see both opportunities and entrepreneurs as social constructions. Not simply as in the traditional academic understanding of social construction which merely claims that our knowledge is made up of jointly constructed understandings and meanings – but more radically as real world social processes, where opportunities are created through the entrepreneurs social interaction with other actors (Blenker, 1991) – and where an individual through his interaction with other actors creates opportunities and because of that constructs herself and become an entrepreneur – or as Marx states in his second thesis on Feuerbach “Man must prove the truth”. The fifth thesis fundamentally states a relational or dialectical relationship between opportunity creation and entrepreneurial becoming. We claim that this is the only way to take the idea of a nexus seriously.

⁸ There has been endless discussions in the entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education literature on whether entrepreneurs are born or made (McClelland 1965, Gartner, 1988, Matlay 2006) – and if entrepreneurship can be taught (Henry, Hill & Leitch 2005; Matlay 2006). One elitist position stating that some individual are naturally born entrepreneurs and therefore cannot be taught – and another more mundane positions is stating that entrepreneurship is a discipline or a method (Sarasvathy & Venkataraman 2011) and can therefore be taught like any other discipline. This thesis takes a third position, accepting that entrepreneurship may differ from most disciplines, because learning entrepreneurship is closely connected to the individual- opportunity nexus. What is relevant learning is subjective and differs from individual to individual. Thus, entrepreneurship cannot be taught in the same objectified and distanced way as we teach traditional academic disciplines. This, however, does not mean that entrepreneurship cannot be learned; but entrepreneurship is learned by being personally involved and subjectively attached to then creation and development of opportunities. Such a learning process may be described as experimental, experiential and existential learning.

7. Entrepreneurial learning take place when individuals create opportunities – and in that process they become entrepreneurs⁹
8. What is adequate entrepreneurial learning differ from individual to individual.¹⁰

Education

9. Entrepreneurship education train individuals to create opportunities – and to reflect on themselves as becoming entrepreneurs.¹¹
10. Entrepreneurship education train individuals to see opportunities and themselves as social constructions – and to socially construct opportunities, themselves and each other as entrepreneurs.¹²
11. Entrepreneurship education facilitates socially constructive processes of creation, becoming and reflection.¹³

⁹ The seventh thesis states that three parallel processes take place at the same time. One process is the opportunity creation process where the entrepreneur *transforms* situations into opportunities, another is the entrepreneur formation process where the individual is *becoming* an entrepreneur and the third process is the learning process where the entrepreneur *reflects* both on her own becoming an entrepreneur and improves her work on opportunities (Biggs 1999, Biesta 2005).

¹⁰ As the opportunity creation process is highly idiosyncratic and the entrepreneurial becoming fundamentally existential, the most essential parts of the entrepreneurial learning process cannot be generalized (Blenker, Frederiksen, Korsgaard, Müller, Neergaard, & Thrane 2012)

¹¹ Although only little can be generalized and entrepreneurship perhaps cannot be taught, education and training is absolutely meaningful. Entrepreneurship education must focus on the three aspects of entrepreneurial didactics: 1) how do I create opportunities 2) what does it mean for me to become an entrepreneur, and 3) how do I best reflect on this dialectical process.

¹² Entrepreneurship education is often discussed as a question of choosing between teaching *about*, training *for* or learning *through* entrepreneurship. An entrepreneurship education approach based on these 11 theses must fundamentally be a learning through pedagogy. As both opportunities and entrepreneurs are seen social constructions, entrepreneurship education must bring students through social processes where they actually construct real opportunities for themselves and in reality construct themselves as entrepreneurs.

¹³ Traditional pedagogy focus on the content of education in terms of "what" the students should learn and care less about "how" the student learn. What students should or what they need to learn is however fundamentally dependent on each students individual-opportunity nexus, and cannot be generalised (Blenker, Frederiksen, Korsgaard, Müller, Neergaard, & Thrane 2012). The entrepreneurial "learning through" pedagogy suggested by the 11 theses significantly changes the role of the teacher (Blenker, Dreisler & Kjeldsen 2006, Blenker & Rind Christensen, 2010) towards being a facilitator of socially constructive processes (Löbler 2006). Entrepreneurial pedagogy must focus on the learning process and "how" the students learn and less on content and "what" they learn.

Final reflections

There is no conclusion to a paper like this. The 11 theses are the corpus of the paper – and the contribution of the paper! They provide a consistent set of assumptions, statements and consequences, which it is possible to build entrepreneurship education upon. In the footnotes each of the 11 theses have been further legitimized and the background for stating the theses is presented.

You may disagree on these assumptions, statements and consequences – but in case you do – these theses challenge you to formulate an alternative set of consistent and coherent assumptions, statements and consequences. From there debate can begin.

The 11 theses are deliberately polemic! As such they are useful for the development of entrepreneurship education in two ways. For those entrepreneurship education researchers who accept the 11 theses they can serve as a consistent foundation for further development of entrepreneurship education research. For those entrepreneurship education researchers who disagree partly or fully on the theses they can serve as vehicle for identifying precisely what paradigmatic differences exist in the field.

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